



## A short history of the Oral History Society, c. 1973–2013

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**A short history  
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The Oral History Society, founded forty years ago, is one of the earliest organisations dedicated to the promotion of oral history in the world. Since then the Society has become an important forum for the development of oral history practice not only in Britain, but also further afield. The Society's international outlook has resulted in support for oral history organisations in other countries and has meant that while the Society's activities have helped to make oral history in Britain distinct, members of the Society have participated in the exchange of theory and practice across national borders. That the Society has remained a vibrant and relevant organisation is in large part a result of the growth of oral history in Britain, but it is also because the Society has adapted and changed in response to that development.

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<sup>1</sup> I do not intend this article to be an institutional or organisational history. I will leave that to my colleague Robert Perks who is planning to write a detailed and more comprehensive history of the Society. In addition, Robert Wilkinson is currently carrying out oral history interviews with leading members of the Society and these will only become fully accessible to researchers in the future. I have used the little that is available and would like to acknowledge Robert Wilkinson's assistance and support in the early drafting of this article although any errors are mine and mine alone.

Alistair Thomson's *Four paradigm transformations in oral history* published in the *Oral History Review* in 2007 is amongst the best-known history of oral history.<sup>2</sup> This builds on an earlier co-authored introduction written by Thomson with Robert Perks in their co-edited *Oral History Reader*.<sup>3</sup> According to Perks and Thomson, the first paradigm shift is the emergence of modern oral history after the Second World War, while the second shift is characterised as the 'turn to memory' in response to positivist critics who had attacked oral history as too naively reliant on memory as a source of evidence. The third paradigm shift the authors claim was a rejection of the interviewer as objective, neutral observer and the recognition that interviews are produced as a result of both the interviewer and interviewee bringing ideas and beliefs to the encounter, and the final transformation is identified as the digital revolution. While I will be examining the first three below, the fourth will not be explored here, partly because the impact of the digital revolution is still playing out and partly because this will be the subject of a separate paper.<sup>4</sup>

Perks and Thomson's history explicitly draws on Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,<sup>5</sup> in which Kuhn sought to explain how changes in scientific beliefs occur. In Kuhn's model, there are periods of history when theories, values and assumptions are widely shared, consolidated and maintained. A paradigm shift signals the dramatic end of a conceptual worldview and its replacement by another. These changes, for Kuhn, are intellectually violent revolutions: upheavals that displace all former ways of thinking. The most obvious problem is that the changes Perks and Thomson identify are simply not commensurate with those Kuhn identifies in the history of science. However, even as metaphor, adopting Kuhn's model unintentionally establishes the idea that oral history has progressed through a series of developmental stages. Such an

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<sup>2</sup> A. Thomson, *Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History*, „Oral History Review“, Vol. 34 (2007), No. 1, p. 49–70.

<sup>3</sup> R. Perks, A. Thomson, *Critical developments: introduction*, [in:] *The Oral History Reader*, eds R. Perks, A. Thomson, London, p. 1–13.

<sup>4</sup> This is to be presented initially as a paper at the Oral History Network, Economic and Social History Conference, Vienna 2014: G. Smith, *The man who killed my grandfather or how I fell out love with oral history: oral history collectives and Web 2.0*.

<sup>5</sup> T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago 1996.

interpretation has more commonality with Whiggish and teleological constructions of history. The result is also one in which the existence of continuing and older practices become minimised, the granularity of change smoothed over, and the historical contexts in which such changes occurred neglected.

Instead of using Kuhn's theories and a framework of historical progress, another way of thinking about how oral history and the Oral History Society have changed would be to apply the ideas of Ludwig Fleck (1896–1961). Fleck was born in Lemberg (L'viv) and was a Polish-Jewish-Israeli microbiologist and immunologist. In the 1930s, Fleck developed the concept of thought collectives. Fleck believed that when people began to exchange and debate ideas then they were moving towards developing a collective or group way of thinking. Through agreements, disagreements, understandings and misunderstandings, a group would develop its own thought style and mood. According to Fleck, it is through this process that 'facts' and 'objective realities' are constructed. Significantly, however, people belong to more than one thought collective and might transfer ideas and practices from one sphere of thought to another depending on commensurability. No single thought collective operates in isolation and indeed Fleck emphasised the importance of the historical context within which thought collectives operate.<sup>6</sup>

However, before applying Fleck's approach it is worth describing the present day version of the Oral History Society. The Society is currently a democratic membership based organisation with around a thousand members mainly located in Britain and is a charity (first registered in 1983). As well as an annual conference, the Society reaches beyond its membership by offering regular training courses, workshops and day conferences, often in conjunction with other national organisations. The Society's Higher Education Group offers a regular seminar series and an annual advanced school and underpinning the support to community oral historians and projects is the Regional Network consisting of local representatives of the Society. In addition, the Society lobbies on behalf of oral historians to

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<sup>6</sup> Fleck's best-known work in this area is *The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, (eds T.J. Trenn, R.K. Merton, foreword by Thomas Kuhn, Chicago 1979). This is the first English translation of L. Fleck, *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache. Einführung in die Lehre vom Denkstil und Denkkollektiv*, Basel 1935.

national organisations, including national funding bodies, as well as advising practitioners on a range of issues, such as archiving and the use of oral history in different settings. The Society's website, membership newsletter, e-noticeboard and *Oral History* journal remain the most important routes through which the Society disseminates news and developments in theory and practice.<sup>7</sup> Responsibility for coordinating the Society's initiatives lies with a Committee of Trustees.

Members have long shared a number of values, concerns and approaches to oral history. These bind Committee and Society members together, and collectively, in Fleck's terminology, are the Society's on-going thought-mood. This thought-mood has led the Society to engage routinely in a series of activities: promoting and popularising oral history as a way of understanding the past (including as a view from the present), encouraging best practice, emphasising the centrality of ethics and archiving to oral history, and developing theoretical insights with particular reference to memory and narrative.

Where did it all start? Ethnographers, local and folk historians can make the most convincing claims of taking the earliest initiatives in oral history in Britain in the twentieth century. A contributor noted in an edition of the *Amateur Historian* in 1957, for example, that 'the collection of information from old people does not feature in the textbooks, yet it is an essential process in compiling local history'.<sup>8</sup> Another important influence came from those with an interest in capturing evidence of disappearing rural traditions. In the 1950s, the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University and the Welsh Folk Museum (St Fagans) both established recording programmes.<sup>9</sup> A common feature of the 'folk life' collections was the recording of minority groups, such as indigenous Gaelic and Welsh speakers whose languages at the time seemed to be on the brink of extinction. Researchers often drew parallels with oral tradition studies based in other societies, especially in Africa.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See: <http://www.ohs.org.uk> (accessed: 17 May 2013).

<sup>8</sup> L. Dopson, *Old people as sources of history*, „*Amateur Historian*“, Vol. 3 (1957), No. 4, p. 150–152.

<sup>9</sup> Although the Ulster Folk Museum in Northern Ireland opened in 1964, it was not until the 1970s that an oral history programme was instigated.

<sup>10</sup> Here the research of Colin Bundy and Jan Vansina is of particular relevance.

There have been influences from oral history and oral tradition from Wales.<sup>11</sup> However, it is notable that in 1973, the spring issue of *Oral History* was ‘a Scottish number’.<sup>12</sup> The role of the Scottish Oral History Group (SOHG) has been such that for over two decades the Committee has routinely included a member of the SOHG in part to liaise between the two organisations. Eric Cregeen (1921–1983) proved perhaps the most influential of figures from Scotland. Cregeen had joined the School of Scottish Studies in 1966, was an early Committee member, and would play a leading role in founding the SOHG in 1978.<sup>13</sup> However, the SOHG and the Society have developed along different lines with the SOHG abandoning a membership model of organisation, while the Society continues to find value in retaining membership-base.

In England, there were a number of similar initiatives in folk studies. At the forefront have been the Institute of Dialect and Foklore Studies at the University of Leeds and the Centre for English Cultural Tradition directed by John Widdowson at Sheffield.<sup>14</sup> George Ewart Evans’ (1909–1988) work in rural England also echoed many of the aims of the folk life collectors. Their central interest, like their counterparts in Scotland and Wales, lay in capturing the disappearing practices and languages of the countryside, alerting oral historians to an appreciation of orality, including dialect.

Research in oral tradition regularly featured in the early issues of *Oral History*. A little later Ruth Finnegan and Doc Rowe would continue to bring the ideas from linguistics, musicology and oral tradition to the Society, in part as Committee members. However, as early as the 1980s, oral tradition and oral history were beginning to diverge. Oral historians were placing greater emphasis on living memory (both individual and ‘collective’) and had effectively begun to distance oral history from folk life studies.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the early influence of folk lore and oral transmission in the

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Beth Thomas from the Museum of Wales has been a long-term member of the Society’s Committee as well as serving as the Society’s Vice-Chair.

<sup>12</sup> T.C. Smout, *Preface*, „Oral History”, Vol. 2 (1974), No. 1, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> For a short history of SOHG and Cregeen’s role see: <http://www.thesohg.org/about-us> (accessed: 17 V 2013).

<sup>14</sup> See: [http://www.mun.ca/president/99-ooreport/honor/honorary\\_widdowson.html](http://www.mun.ca/president/99-ooreport/honor/honorary_widdowson.html) (accessed: 17 V 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Trustees and members implicitly recognised this when making Doc Rowe one of the Oral History Society’s Vice-Presidents after he retired from the Committee.

development of oral history in Britain are too often forgotten, especially in their contribution to constructions of memory, mythology and narrative generally and the subjective nature of the transmission of memory between generations more specifically.

In 1969, an informal day conference at the British Institute of Recorded Sound (BIRS) would lead to the formation of an oral history steering group. Four years later, this group announced the creation of the Oral History Society.<sup>16</sup> Academics mainly attended that initial conference: labour historians and sociologists as well as the folk historians. However, there was also a representative from the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) and significantly, a representative from the hosts, significant because the archive organisation would later become the British Library Sound Archive – a key partner of the Society from the 1990s onwards.

Labour historians, who were beginning to make their mark in academic history, were central to the early development of the Society and oral history more broadly. These historians included Raphael Samuel (1934–1996), one of the most influential labour and social historians in Britain who helped launch the *History Workshop Journal* in 1976, and John Saville (1916–2009), a leading labour historian, who would become the second Chair of the Society. In addition, the ideas of other socialist historians who were not undertaking oral history work also proved important. So, for example, the writings of C.L.R. James, E.P. Thompson, Christopher Hill, George Rudé, Dorothy Thompson and others, shaped the thinking of many of the early oral historians, especially in the shared aspiration of producing ‘history from below’ (which in turn can be traced to the French Annales school of history).

Early conference themes included oral tradition and dialect, the First World War, work, local history, street culture, oral history on radio (in partnership with the BBC), classroom oral history, and the Spanish Civil War. Community, museum and county record office initiatives also regularly featured on conference programmes. Early issues of the *Oral History*

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<sup>16</sup> In the United States, oral history had developed a few years before with the formation of the Oral History Association in 1966. The Columbia University Oral History Research Office, founded in 1948, claims to be ‘the oldest and largest organized oral history program in the world’, although the early programme tended to collect the testimonies of ‘great men’ and would not place the same emphasis on the orality of oral history, as was the case in Britain.

journal included an equally diverse range of topics and while 'history from below' was central, there were articles on unorganised labour and even conservative and deferent sections of the working class.<sup>17</sup> These therefore were not simply celebratory histories of non-elites and their disempowerment, but contributors also explored acquiescence as well as resistance, and successful and unsuccessful attempts at making change by the less powerful in society. For example, early issues of *Oral History* carried articles on families. In these, contributors portrayed children as active actors in history (an idea that would take another 30 years for mainstream sociologists to re-discover).

'History from below' also began to include encouraging a wider participation in 'making history' that went beyond the universities. Oral historians were encouraged to break down 'boundaries between the educational institution and the world, between the [history] profession and ordinary people'.<sup>18</sup> This was somewhat of a transitional position (or proto-idea in Fleck's terminology) that moved oral historians towards the concept of challenging hierarchies inherent in the research encounter; later, in the 1990s, described as 'shared authority'.<sup>19</sup> However, in the meantime, there would be a number of developments between encouraging non-academic history making and 'shared authority'. This would include new understandings of the interview relationship and overall this development was incremental change rather than the big bang of paradigm shift.

In the 1970s oral historians increasingly twinned 'history from below' with the aim of uncovering the lives of people who had been, in Sheila Rowbotham's memorable phrase, 'hidden from history'.<sup>20</sup> Although Rowbotham did not use oral history in her own research, she was a major inspiration for others including feminist historians such as Jill Liddington, a Committee member in the early 1980s and an editor of the journal's pioneering public history section twenty years later.<sup>21</sup> The influence of feminism and the 'hidden from history' approach is evident in the second

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<sup>17</sup> See for example: S. Raphael, *Headington Quarry: Recording a labouring community*, „Oral History”, Vol. 1 (1972), No. 4, p. 107–122. There was also evidence of what would much later become known amongst historians as the history of material culture.

<sup>18</sup> P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford 1978, p. 7–8.

<sup>19</sup> M. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, New York 1990.

<sup>20</sup> S. Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It*, London 1973.

<sup>21</sup> For an early example of her work see: J. Liddington, *Rediscovering suffrage history*, „History Workshop Journal”, No. 4 (1977), p. 192–201.



themed *Oral History* journal published in 1977 on 'Women's history'. Thereafter a long and creative relationship developed between oral history and women's history;<sup>22</sup> by 2002, four issues of *Oral History* had been dedicated to focusing on women's lives.<sup>23</sup>

Oral historians internationally, including those working in the United States, became increasingly influential in developing ideas not only around 'history from below', but also in exploring the ways in which the interview relationship shapes narrated memories (often called intersubjectivity). Oral historians have also applied the challenges raised in women's oral history much more widely. For example, Susan Armitage's and Sherna Berger Gluck's dilemma as expressed in their question, 'How do we simultaneously understand and document women's subordination and resistance?' became a query increasingly applied beyond women's history.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the question became even more interesting when oral historians began to consider how place, race, ethnicity and class might combine with gender in shaping subjectivities of remembering.

In addition, as oral historians of women's history have highlighted, there is a complicated relationship between people remembering as actors and as subjects of their own histories. Oral historians have thought about how interviewees talk about this relationship as an expression of historical consciousness.<sup>25</sup> Oral history, labour history and feminist theory have thus proved reciprocally supportive at points, especially in understanding the significance of biographies in history. This in turn would lead to further considerations of the gendering of the nature and status of 'collective' and 'individual' memory.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See: J. Bornat and H. Diamond, *Women's history and oral history: developments and debates*, „Women's History Review“, Vol. 16, No. 1 (2007), p. 19–39.

<sup>23</sup> „Oral History“, Vol. 5 (1977), No. 2; „Oral History“, Vol. 10 (1982), No. 2; „Oral History“, Vol. 21 (1993), No. 2; „Oral History“, Vol. 30 (2002), No. 1.

<sup>24</sup> See: S.H. Armitage, S.B. Gluck, *Reflections on women's oral history, an exchange*, [in] *Women's Oral History: the Frontiers' Reader*, eds S. Armitage, P. Hart, K. Weathermon, Nebraska 2002, p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> See for example: P. Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral Histories of the Second World War*, Manchester 1998.

<sup>26</sup> See for example: A. Green, *Individual remembering and „collective memory“: theoretical presuppositions and contemporary debates*, „Oral History“, Vol. 32 (2004), No. 2; G. Smith, *Beyond individual/collective memory: women's transactive memories of food, fashion and conflict*, „Oral History“, Vol. 35 (2007), No. 2.

As well as labour historians, historians of women's lives and collectors of oral tradition, the development of oral history attracted a range of diverse disciplinary interests. Social scientists, especially sociologists and psychologists, as well as archivists and, museum and library staff were joining the Society in some numbers from the mid-1970s onwards. Such a mix of both university and non-university based practitioners was further enriched by a small number of television and radio researchers and producers. These broadcasters had developed an interest in the potential uses of oral history as a means of featuring previously unheard voices and stories and contributed much to raising and shaping public awareness and understanding of oral history. By the 1990s, the use of such recordings by the media in Britain had become ubiquitous and even routine.

Researchers tend to trace broadcast oral history in Britain back to the *Radio Ballads*.<sup>27</sup> Between 1957 and 1964, Charles Parker produced eight programmes or ballads with musicians Peggy Seeger and Ewan McCall contributing folk music. The programmes were fashioned from long recordings with 'ordinary people' recalling their experiences and featured oral histories from boxers, fishermen, migrants, miners and construction workers.<sup>28</sup> The Scottish oral historian Billy Kay, for his BBC Radio Scotland *Odyssey* series, would take up the approach of combining recollections based on lengthy recordings with music in the 1980s. In recent years, one of the most prolific oral historians on radio in Britain has been Alan Dein who has produced programmes as diverse as the story of Yemeni steel workers in Sheffield and the end of British rule in Aden. As a Trustee of the Society, he also co-authored the Society's *Media Guidelines*.<sup>29</sup>

Some researchers have claimed that former Trustee Stephen Peet (1920–2005) was the father of television oral history in Britain. Peet helped to popularise oral history mainly through his *Yesterday's Witness* series (1969–1981).<sup>30</sup> For many, however, it was *The Great War*, first broadcast by the BBC in 1964 (re-released on DVD in 2002), that was the key early example of television

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<sup>27</sup> See: J. Liddington, A. Dein, M. Whitaker, *Listening to the past on radio*, „Oral History”, Vol. 34 (2006), No. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Long term Committee member, folklorist and now a Vice-President of the Society, Doc Rowe worked with Parker.

<sup>29</sup> [http://www.ohs.org.uk/documents/Media\\_Guidelines\\_1006.pdf](http://www.ohs.org.uk/documents/Media_Guidelines_1006.pdf) (accessed 17 V 2013).

<sup>30</sup> See: S. Humphries, *Oral history on television: a retrospective*, „Oral History”, Vol. 36 (2008), No. 2.

oral history. In addition, others made significant contributions, including Philip Donnellan (1924–1999).<sup>31</sup> Since the late 1980s, Steve Humphries (Testimony Films) has consistently kept oral history on television. Humphries taught oral history on the Essex postgraduate course in the early 1980s before founding his own broadcast company. He has also been a long-term member of the Oral History Society, serving as the Society's Secretary and currently as one of the Society's Honorary Vice-Presidents.

Unsurprisingly given such a mix of people, there were a number of internal tensions that arose in the early years as the Society developed. One of the most evident strains was between those approaching oral history from a sociological perspective and those who were historians. Authors of early journal articles hint at the differences between researchers who placed different emphases on past and present in the interpretation of oral narratives. In recollection, such differences are more pronounced. For example, Bill Williams, a pioneering oral historian who recorded members of the Jewish communities of Manchester in the 1970s, recalled in interview years later that Raphael Samuel would frequently debate the value of oral history with sociologists.<sup>32</sup> However, it was amongst the researchers in the Sociology Department at the University of Essex that oral history made a significant foothold.

At Essex Paul Thompson, Trevor Lummis and Thea Vigne's study *Edwardians: Family Life and Work Experience Before 1918, 1870–1973* would prove important in a number of ways. Undertaken in the late 1960s and early 1970s, *The Edwardians* formed the basis of the first national oral history project in Britain. A total of 537 long interviews were recorded for the study, with 453 of those fully transcribed. Although such large surveys would prove relatively rare in the longer term, *The Edwardians* established a model of oral history archiving practice. This would be later reinforced by the national organisation known as Qualidata (now submerged into the UK Data Service) when *The Edwardians On-line* was promoted as a demonstration archive.<sup>33</sup> The practice of archiving original recordings, as the primary documents, with accompanying paperwork (including transcripts or summaries) would become the standard routinely promoted by the Society. Thompson would later establish the National Life Stories Collection (1987)

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<sup>31</sup> See: <http://www.philipdonnellan.co.uk/> (accessed: 17 V 2013).

<sup>32</sup> Oral history interview with Bill Williams (recorded by R. Wilkinson).

<sup>33</sup> See: <http://www.qualidata.essex.ac.uk/edwardians/about/> (accessed: 17 V 2013).

which would firmly root oral history within the British Library under the leadership of its first and current curator Robert Perks.<sup>34</sup>

Another output from the project was Thompson's publication *The Edwardians, The Remaking of British Society*,<sup>35</sup> which proved both a popular history and an influence on how oral historians could write history. However, it was the publication *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* that directly arose from The Edwardians project that would be the most influential guide to doing oral history published in Britain to date.<sup>36</sup>

By the time of the Society's foundation in 1973, *Oral History* had already appeared two years earlier. Ever since then the relationship between journal and Society has reflected this slightly odd beginning. The editorial board has enjoyed a degree of autonomy that goes beyond the Trustees respecting the independence of the editors. Members of other learned organisations might even consider the degree of editorial autonomy unusual. It is, however, a result of this arrangement or separation that the journal remains an important route for new ideas to enter the thinking of the Society.

Colin Bundy would later remark that the early issues of *Oral History* had 'a wonderfully homemade feel to the enterprise'.<sup>37</sup> Indeed the first journals looked typewritten rather than typeset; they have the feel of communiques from the front and manifestos of intent: oral historians had begun thinking and speaking about being active in 'a movement'. The Society and the journal seemed especially attuned to the politics of the mid to late 1970s. These were the years of widespread labour unrest, mass union membership, declining social inequalities, and increasing political awareness amongst large sections of youth, especially around a growing anti-fascist movement.

These were also the years of backlash against corporate culture, expressed most vividly by punk, but spreading much more broadly beyond popular music and literature. A couple of decades later Paul Thompson would describe the presentation style of *Oral History* as 'Quakerish'.<sup>38</sup> However,

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<sup>34</sup> Perks would also follow Thompson as the second Director of National Life Stories and has been the longest serving Secretary of the Society; a post he continues to hold.

<sup>35</sup> P. Thompson, *The Edwardians. The Remaking of British Society*, London 1975 (republished) 1992.

<sup>36</sup> P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford 1978, 1988 or 2000.

<sup>37</sup> Oral history interview with Colin Bundy (recorded by R. Wilkinson).

<sup>38</sup> P. Thompson, *Editorial*, „Oral History", Vol. 22 (1994), No. 2, p. 2.

for some younger members it reflected the cultural Do-It-Yourself ethos that was part of punk's anti-consumerist *mentalité* that anyone could do it, whether it was making music, producing fanzines or conducting oral history interviews.<sup>39</sup> In part, this cultural context would shape the drive toward community oral history. So far, it has also underpinned the views of both Trustees and editors that the journal should not become part of one of the corporate publishing houses that now dominate academic dissemination. The journal continues as one of the few learned publications that remains independently published.

By the late 1970s, the journal editors had started the process of raising the journal's production values, including in a new layout design and the use of photographs to illustrate articles; values that remain in sharp contrast with traditional academic publications in Britain. Indeed, by improving design and layout the editors intended to make the journal attractive to audiences beyond academia. Successive editorial teams have reinforced this by encouraging authors to write in an accessible style. That the journal retained international news and 'Current British work' sections – important sources of information about community-based as well as academic research – simply underscored such differences. Independence, accessibility, high quality design and an attempt to reach wider audiences has meant that in some academic circles scholars have perceived *Oral History* as not being seriously academic.

While developments in the dissemination of theory and practice were significant, the importance of friendship networks runs through memories of the early history of the Society. It is obvious that the early pioneers enjoyed social interaction in a way that perhaps set them apart from other researchers, especially 'traditional' historians who were often more comfortable when engaged in individual archive based research. One of the key friendships at the time was between Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson. This connected *Oral History* and *History Workshop* with a number of the early Committee meetings held in Samuels' home, and it would provide the basis for future collaborations. Colin Bundy, an activist in the Society's early years, later recalled the late 1970s as the point at which, '*History Workshop*, the *Oral History* journal and *Social History*' had come together around 'history from below', recalling the 'extraordinary vitality of that mo-

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<sup>39</sup> See: J. Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, London 1991, p. XV.

ment for oral history'.<sup>40</sup> It was also the point in time that the first version of the Oral History Society as a thought collective had fully emerged. Moreover, and as will be subsequently demonstrated, it would trigger a damaging reaction from a deeply conservative history profession who viewed such developments as new, radical and even a threat to the status of historians.

This emergence of the thought collective owed much to the discussion groups and the informal meetings that members were organising. Through these meetings, Bill Williams would later claim that he 'learnt' oral history practice from Thompson and theory – 'a socialist interpretation of history' – from Samuel. Similarly, Jerry White, a founding member of London History Workshop and a *History Workshop* editor, recalls discussing oral history with George Ewart Evans and Paul Thompson prior to researching his first book.<sup>41</sup> Colin Bundy introduced Bill Williams to Paul Thompson and as a result, Bundy remembers becoming an enthusiastic activist in the Society for a period.<sup>42</sup>

As already indicated Paul Thompson played a pivotal role in organising as well as in leading the Society. It was Thompson, for example, who brought George Ewart Evans to the first meetings.<sup>43</sup> Joanna Bornat, who would later hold the first professorial chair in oral history in Britain, was another originally introduced to oral history by Thompson; he supervised her thesis in the 1970s.<sup>44</sup> Then there were the graduates from the programme Thompson taught at Essex. From this small grouping, the Society drew in others. Thompson and Williams would become the external examiners of

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<sup>40</sup> Oral history interview with Bill Williams (recorded by R. Wilkinson).

<sup>41</sup> Oral history interview with Bill Williams (recorded by R. Wilkinson); British Library Sound Archive, C1149/22, Oral history interview with Jerry White, 15 II 2008, 3 III 2008, 16 V 2008, 20 VI 2008 (recorded by R. Wilkinson). See also: J. White, *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an East End Tenement Block 1887–1920*, London 1980.

<sup>42</sup> British Library Sound Archive, C1149/24, Oral history interview with Colin Bundy, 8 III 2010 (recorded by R. Wilkinson).

<sup>43</sup> Evans had published his first oral history in 1956, *Ask the Fellows who Cut the Hay, about rural life in Suffolk*. See: [http://storytelling.research.glam.ac.uk/media/files/documents/2007-11-16/Maureen\\_James\\_article.pdf](http://storytelling.research.glam.ac.uk/media/files/documents/2007-11-16/Maureen_James_article.pdf) (accessed: 17 V 2013).

<sup>44</sup> British Library Sound Archive, C1454/01, Oral history interview with Joanna Bornat, 23 VI 2011 (recorded by Sophie Williams-Brown). Bornat remains an influential voice in oral history through her subsequent work, most recently demonstrating the opportunities and challenges of reusing oral history, and as a long-term Committee member and editor of „Oral History“.

Elizabeth Roberts' landmark mid-1970s thesis: an oral history of women in working class households and communities.<sup>45</sup> By the mid-1980s, Williams would be working with Rob Perks in a nascent network that linked projects in Bradford and Manchester. The spread of oral history practice and the Society in the 1970s and into the 1980s was as much by 'word of mouth' through developing friendship networks as it was through publications.<sup>46</sup>

In the 1980s insights were continuing to be drawn, and approaches adopted, from across the disciplinary spectrum. From history, methods of testing reliability and consistency of 'testimonies' were embraced; while the contribution from sociological studies included purposive and representative sampling methods and theories about identity, difference and the interview relationship. There were ideas about life review and remembering from social psychology that reinforced findings from the incipient speciality of gerontology. From psychoanalytical approaches there were understandings gleaned about the unconscious and later, emotion and transference in interviews. Beyond the academic disciplines the 'home made' culture of community publishing, with its record of enabling groups to produce and disseminate histories, was proving influential.<sup>47</sup>

The connections between History Workshop and the Oral History Society Committee remained especially strong until the 1990s when a new generation of *History Workshop Journal* editors turned away from community based history and sought academic respectability. A move that some considered a turn to the political right, especially when in 1994 the strapline 'a journal of socialist and feminist historians', was deleted. It felt as if oral history had lost a fellow traveller. When Raphael Samuel died two years later, the Society had not only lost a critical friend, but also a champion.

By the mid-1980s, a second generation of oral historians had added themselves to the thought collective. Tying members together was a set of

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<sup>45</sup> Roberts continues to be an Honorary Vice President of the Society. See: <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/users/cnwrs/resources/index.htm> (accessed: 17 V 2013).

<sup>46</sup> Oral history interview with Bill Williams (recorded by R. Wilkinson). Further evidence of the importance of personal contacts can be found when the connections between research centres are examined. For example, The School of Scottish Studies had provided Paul Thompson with the Scottish contacts for *The Edwardians and the later Living the Fishing project*.

<sup>47</sup> See: J. Bornat, *The communities of community publishing*, „Oral History“, Vol. 20 (1992), No. 2, p. 23–31.

norms, concepts and practices. By the late 1980s this thought-mood included a commitment to record people whose lives had been hidden from history and to archive these recordings, an understanding that the interview relationship shaped the materials that were being collected by oral historians, and an increasing appreciation of the ways in which the past was being recalled in the present. It was a shared understanding that bound activists together regardless of where they worked, or what their backgrounds were or to some extent the colour of their ideological beliefs.

Society members in the 1970s and 1980s were also often politically active with some having a longer history of political engagement. The British government in 1958, for example, had imprisoned Paul Thompson for having breached the Official Secrets Act (1911) by revealing information gained while undergoing National Service.<sup>48</sup> A decade and more on, one key point of unity was the anti-apartheid movement. Both Colin Bundy and Thea Vigne had been involved in student and anti-apartheid politics in their native South Africa. Mary Chamberlain, who was another early Committee member of the Society, was active in a group that smuggled African National Congress (ANC) literature into Apartheid South Africa.<sup>49</sup>

The breadth of political belief within the Society included most of the left in Britain at the time: from Labour Party reformists to various shades of revolutionaries. As well as members of the Communist Party, there were critics of Stalinism, especially amongst the Trotskyists. It says much about the broad commitment to oral history that Trustees placed serious political differences to one side. Consensual working was valued and made possible because of a tacit agreement in a set of common objectives that included promoting oral history as a method in uncovering the past of marginalised groups and individuals. Oral history as a movement might have been 'without aim' in the United States,<sup>50</sup> but that was not the case in Britain.

However, it would be incorrect to believe that every oral history activist felt part of the developing thought collective. David Lance, who was a museum curator and the first oral historian at the Imperial War Museum in London, had attended the inaugural Society meeting at the University

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<sup>48</sup> See: H. Carpenter, *That Was Satire That Was: The Satire Boom of the Sixties*, London 2000, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup> K. Keable, *London Recruits: The Secret War Against Apartheid*, London 2012.

<sup>50</sup> R.J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, Chicago 1975; especially p. 127–154.



of Leicester and recalls George Ewart Evans, Paul Thompson, Raphael Samuel, Theo Barker (the Society's first Chair) and John Saville being present. The atmosphere at the meeting he later recalled as imbued by a 'pioneering zeal', but he thought that this was not quite in line with his ideas. He perceived that there was a dominance of the 'social history approach'. He also felt that over the years the Society's direction had not changed 'a great deal' from when he had first joined. Lance would later claim that most of the influential Society figures continued to be 'much the same' as when he had first joined. Some new faces had appeared by the mid-1980s he noted, but 'not qualitatively different historians', and, while he conceded that the Society's membership was growing he believed this was a case of 'like attracting like' and that he felt 'at arm's length from it'. He would later leave the Society having found the style of oral history in the United States more to his liking, especially the study of elites at the Columbia University Center for Oral History.<sup>51</sup> Lance's own approach tended to be light on theory, lacked consideration of the significance of memory and power relations, and focused instead on oral history as a relatively simple 'research method and an archival collecting technique'.<sup>52</sup> It is also telling that Lance had initially believed the Society was potentially 'a professional association for all scholars using these [oral history] methods'.<sup>53</sup>

The resourcing of oral history and the Society in Britain was never straightforward. In 1976 Harold Perkin, a leading historian, was claiming that, 'Oral history ... has become one of the growth areas of social history ... [with] at least seventy research projects currently being pursued'.<sup>54</sup> However, other members of the history profession were actively organising to cut off funding for oral history and from 1974 onwards, resources for oral history were declining. One cause was that the Economic and Social History Committee of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC, later to become the Economic and Social Research Council) had also, but less

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<sup>51</sup> British Library Sound Archive, C1149/01-02, Oral history interview with David Lance, 20 VI 2003 (recorded by M. Winslow). Lance would become curator of Audio Visual Records at the Australian War Memorial after migrating in 1987.

<sup>52</sup> D. Lance, *Oral History in UNESCO Audiovisual archives: A practical reader*, <http://www.unesco.org/webworld/ramp/html/r9704e/r9704eoj.htm> (accessed: 22 VII 2013).

<sup>53</sup> D. Lance, *Oral History in Britain*, „The Oral History Review“ Vol. 2 (1974), p. 65.

<sup>54</sup> H. Perkin, *Social history in Britain*, „Journal of Social History“, Vol. 10 (1976), No. 2, p. 132.

sympathetically, noted the 'rapid growth' of oral history and had recommended 'a policy of containment'. This, they justified by claiming 'methodological difficulties surrounding the field, as well as uncertainties about suitable depositories for tapes and transcriptions, and for an agreed form of final product'. The SSRC's Committee failed to mention that it had earlier encouraged planning for a national oral history archive and then had withdrawn support. Jonathan Hodgkinson and Eve Hostettler responding on behalf of the Society were scathing: One wonders too, how the [SSRC] Committee has assessed the outcome of the historical demography which has continued to be a flourishing field of activity, and on what basis it expects a profitable outcome from its call for computer-based applications in quantitative mediaeval history.<sup>55</sup>

With support for oral history in the university sector becoming limited, there was a drift by younger oral historians towards community oral history. This accelerated by the mid-1980s with the increasing availability of finance from the government's Manpower Service's Commission's Community Programme (MSC-CP) to undertake community projects. It is especially ironic that one result of de-industrialisation, and the accompanying high unemployment of the 1980s recession, was the use of public money to record older peoples' experiences of work and joblessness in an earlier historical period.

Amongst the most significant of the projects to gain this new funding was the Bradford Heritage Recording Unit. Rob Perks, who would later become the Secretary of the Oral History Society, coordinated the Unit. The project also employed Donald Hyslop, who would go on to lead Southampton's oral history section (as well as serving as Vice-Chair of the Society) and Tim Smith, whose photography and oral history projects would provide inspiration for those using oral history in exhibitions. He would also contribute numerous photographs for oral history publications, including some of the covers of *Oral History* and the cover photograph for the second edition of the Perks and Thomson edited *Oral History Reader*.

The Leicester Oral History Archive, later subsumed under the auspices of the East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA),<sup>56</sup> proved to be another influential project. Both the Leicester and Bradford projects paid particular attention to the experiences of individuals from black and ethnic minority

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<sup>55</sup> J. Hodgkinson, E. Hostettler, *News*, „Oral History”, Vol. 4 (1976), No. 2, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> See: <http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/emoha.html> (accessed: 17 V 2013).

communities. A few years earlier, the Oral History Society had begun to respond to a rising awareness of Britain as a postcolonial society. The 1979 conference, 'Oral History and Black History' highlighted potential tensions between researched and researched, particularly in the ways in which oral histories might be appropriated; thereby drawing further attention to the political nature of oral history. It also laid bare the thought-collective's limits: that the people's past was less homogeneous than some members had believed.

For some Society members it was clearly a difficult if enlightening moment and would be an important impetus to further discussions regarding identity and difference; beginning with the Spring 1980 *Oral History* journal issue 'Black History'.<sup>57</sup> As well as articles on ethnicity, some drawn from community projects, *Oral History* has continued to provide oral historians with space to explore a broader range of minority experiences while acknowledging that oral historians need to continue to address issues of representation.

In the Leicester project, Cynthia Brown was central to developments. Brown would later become a Trustee and leading activist and in the Society, including coordinating the Society's Regional Network. Here she recalls her own involvement in community oral history:

„As a mature student at the University of Leicester in the 1980s, I decided to research the undertaking trade in Leicester in the earlier 20th century for my final year dissertation ...I soon exhausted the documentary sources and contacted some local firms of funeral directors to see if they could help... and by talking with them and their staff I learned an enormous amount that I would never have found in written sources.

So, a year or two later, when I saw a community history job advertised at Leicester City Council requiring experience of oral history, I could honestly say that I now had some; and one way or another I've been practising it ever since – as an Education Officer with the local museums, as Project Manager of the East Midlands Oral History Archive [EMOHA] when it was

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<sup>57</sup> *Black history (special issue)*, „Oral History”, Vol. 8 (1980), No. 1. The issue included an article by Donald Hinds, who was a Trustee of the Society. See also: *Ethnicity and national identity*, (special issue), „Oral History”, Vol. 21 (1993), No. 1; „Oral History”, Vol. 30 (2002), No. 1; „Oral History”, Vol. 31 (2003), No. 1; „Oral History”, Vol. 33 (2005), No. 1.

first set up in 2001, and through oral history training, adult teaching and involvement with the Oral History Society when the remit of other 'day jobs' didn't include it".<sup>58</sup>

The Dundee Oral History Project, originally led by one of the Essex graduates, was yet another key community initiative funded by MSC-CP. The Project consciously rejected the oral tradition approach that was dominant in Scotland at the time and instead collected oral histories from city dwellers. As well as collecting oral histories, the team in Scotland used the recordings as a basis for providing learning resources for local school and reminiscence materials for care workers. Seeking to demonstrate an integrated approach to oral history, the team made a television programme describing their work; first broadcast by the BBC in 1986.<sup>59</sup>

The upsurge in community-based oral history in the 1980s had coincided with the beginnings of a boom in local history activity that saw the launch of the *Local History* magazine in 1984. The local oral history schemes, that ran from 1982 to 1988, acted, according to Rob Perks 'as test beds for new techniques and ideas, and a training base for a whole breed of young oral historians deeply committed to community history'.<sup>60</sup> A number of the project's oral historians would go on to play a part in the development of the Society over the next three decades. This, in the first instance strengthened the presence of community oral history within the Society, adding a new dimension to the thought mood, encouraging in turn, a new set of organisational practices that would place the Society in position to take advantage of the second boom in community history that would occur a decade later.

Most of the first phase community oral history projects had ended by the end of the 1980s, and only a few continued. As well as the aforementioned EMOHA, Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop, formed in 1983 also

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<sup>58</sup> <http://www.pettrust.org.uk/guest-blogs/oral-history-by-cynthia-brown> (accessed: 17 V 2013).

<sup>59</sup> An extract of the programme can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDmNZ1k9ksI>. The author of this article was the first project coordinator and is currently the Chair of the Oral History Society.

<sup>60</sup> *Oral History* an annotated bibliography, ed. R. Perks, London 1990. See also: S. Humphries, *The Handbook of Oral History*, London 1984; for details about these Manpower Services' Commission schemes, including a photograph of the Arbroath History Project: G. Smith, *Manpower History: The Arbroath History Project*, „Oral History", Vol. 12 (1984), No. 2.

enjoyed longevity. Three decades on Waltham Forest's members continue to record, reproduce and analyse oral histories; recently e-publishing their original 1980s booklets.<sup>61</sup> Long-term members of the group include Robert Wilkinson who is currently the Treasurer of the Oral History Society. He is also an adviser to a number of projects supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

HLF is the state funding body that has financially underpinned the second wave of community oral history in Britain. By 2009, HLF had granted around £49 million to oral history projects over a fifteen-year period. From the beginning, HLF adopted oral history as a means for local organisations to both engage in recording intangible heritage and to provide volunteers with a means of learning new skills. Stuart Davies, one-time policy adviser to HLF, has pointed out that oral history projects, 'have an almost uniquely flexible ability to hit many HLF priorities and targets.' This includes making strong community links and encouraging participation from amongst a diverse range of people (including in terms of class, ethnicity, sexuality and interests). In addition, HLF continues to celebrate oral history as a means of facilitating cross-cultural understanding as well as intergenerational communication. Davies argued, 'Oral history is generally a collaborative, socially interactive tool, particularly pertinent and accessible to village, community or neighbourhood history or heritage groups.'<sup>62</sup> All this remains especially important to a funding body sensitive to trying to support a wide variety of communities, including communities of interest. At a national level, the Society has been adept at encouraging HLF continuing support of oral history.<sup>63</sup>

Joanna Bornat and Lorraine Sitzia have been amongst those who have written insightfully about the importance of community oral history in the British setting. For Bornat community based oral history 'has been propelled by a political commitment to change, both in terms of changing the historical record and to produce change in and for those engaged in interviewing and being interviewed.' In contrast, according to Bornat, oral

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<sup>61</sup> See for example: <http://www.inquitaudio.co.uk/wfohw/cottageloaves.pdf> (accessed: 17 V 2013).

<sup>62</sup> S. Davies, *A Million Before the Millennium: Oral History and the Lottery*, „Oral History”, Vol. 28 (2000), No. 1, p. 107.

<sup>63</sup> For more on HLF and oral history see: S. Hussey, *Bountiful Harvest? Oral history and the Local Heritage Initiative*, „Oral History”, Vol. 28 (2000), No. 2.

history in the academic context has tended to evade considerations of process, especially in how participants construct narratives, as well as the impact of the interview on interviewees and interviewers. Instead, researchers emphasise data produced by the interview, with interpretation and analysis to the fore. However, Bornat is also critical of community oral history and is drawing in part on earlier evaluations that identified unreflective approaches that tended to take oral histories at face value while emphasising heroic and consensual interpretations of 'community'.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Bornat points out that the products of community oral history, may not match the democratic, inclusive processes that were involved in their collection. For example, community historians may likewise underplay the diversity and complexity of the material generated in their final outputs.<sup>65</sup>

Building on Bornat's analysis, Lorraine Sitzia has argued that community oral history became an increasingly significant influence within the Society culminating with the Trustees supporting the creation of the Regional Network of Oral Historians in the early 1990s. As Sitzia also notes, the Committee resisted proposals to form a community network of Society members throughout the mid to late 1980s. In part, this arose from a concern that such a development would signal that the Society was placing too much emphasis on community oral history. Some Trustees also expressed fears that such a move could lead to the professionalisation of oral history; militating against the long held egalitarian belief that oral history should be open to all.

By 1992 the Regional Network was finally established and advertised in the journal with few, if any, ill effects and with representatives around the country offering local support and advice.

„In many ways the Network has become a network of community historians. The Network was initially led by the Committee but now has its own co-ordinator who sits on the Committee. It holds annual events to bring together the regional representatives to discuss issues pertinent to the practice of oral history in settings such as museums, archives and within

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<sup>64</sup> For example: L. Passerini, *Work ideology and consensus under Italian fascism*, „History Workshop Journal”, Vol. 8 (1979), No. 1, p. 82–108.

<sup>65</sup> J. Bornat, *Two Oral Histories: valuing our difference*, „The Oral History Review”, Vol. 21 (1993), No. 1, p. 74.

community groups. In essence, the Network has become one of the main points of contact for public engagement with the Oral History Society".<sup>66</sup>

The changing composition of Network representatives also provides at least in part evidence of changes in oral history activity as a whole. At the end of the 1990s, the Regional Network consisted of thirty-two individuals. Over half of Networkers were employed in museums, libraries and archives, a fifth in universities, and two were freelance oral historians. Fifteen years later the Network had grown to forty-nine representatives with just over a third working in museums, archives and libraries. While the proportion employed by universities had remained the same (a fifth), a further third of all Networkers were finding work as freelancers with just under a tenth based in community organisations. The growth in numbers of Networkers, and in particular the number who became freelancers or were working for community organisations, reflects both the expansion of community oral history in the last decade and the patterns of funding underpinning activity.

This Network, according to Sitzia, made the Society influential beyond the narrow confines of its membership. She noted that, '... it would be fair to say the Oral History Society has become the point of reference for much oral history practice in Britain'<sup>67</sup>. Arguably, the Regional Network provided the Society with the periphery necessary to exercise that influence amongst a third and fourth generation of oral historians. As Fleck describes it, a maturing group will develop an esoteric circle of experts and a wider exoteric laity, and the Regional Network marked this point in the Society's history. While, the Trustees had avoided the development of a professional clique, there grew a new division within the Society based on levels of expertise. The Regional Network in the 1990s, along with the training courses that the Society began to offer, established specialist advice and support for a growing number of people who would undertake oral history as a leisure pursuit or voluntary activity most often on a temporary and part-time basis. The result was that the Society attracted a substantial proportion of members who would only remain in membership for one or two years, reflecting the duration of their involvement in oral history.

While the lack of retention of members has troubled some Trustees, high membership turnover means that the Society has a pool of influence that

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<sup>66</sup> L. Sitzia, *Telling people's histories: an exploration of community history-making from 1970–2000* (DPhil), Sussex 2010, p. 81–82.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

reaches beyond its current members. Paradoxically, those who continue in membership and who offer expertise are perhaps more likely to be the source of problems. As Fleck pointed out, such collectives develop inflexible approaches in which 'truths' are located in a mythical golden age and there is little space for new ideas. However, while there is a large periphery, or exoteric circle, then Fleck suggests there is less likelihood of the experts cutting themselves off. Indeed, he notes that members of the inner circle in such circumstances endeavour to win trust and appreciation, as well as pledge to work for a common good. Here he sees the collective developing a democratic character in which the test of correctness becomes 'the recognition of everybody' and not simply a truth recognised by a few. The ideal being that all can participate in creating new knowledge, and not just the experts of the inner circle. 'This obligation is also expressed in the democratically equal regard for anybody that acquires knowledge. All research workers, as a matter of principle, are regarded as possessing equal rights.'<sup>68</sup>

If community oral history in the last decade and more has been dominant, and reflected in the composition of the Society's Trustees, the revival of interest in oral history in Higher Education has been a much more recent phenomenon. For many years, the MA Social History at the Essex was the only postgraduate programme in England teaching oral history.<sup>69</sup> The minority of oral historians employed in university posts from the 1980s onwards tended to find work outside history departments and typically within continuing education, health and social welfare and even medicine.<sup>70</sup> The capacity to provide teaching and supervision has therefore remained relatively small, but has only recently become a problem with a dramatic rise in demand amongst undergraduate and postgraduate students. In response the Trustees identified Higher Education as a priority area and from 2009 began the process of strengthening the links between the Society and

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<sup>68</sup> L. Fleck, *Entstehung und Entwicklung...*, IV. 5.

<sup>69</sup> Established by Paul Thompson the option course was taught by Thea Vigne between 1974 and 1977 and then by Trevor Lummis and Steve Humphries, who were respectively the Society's Secretary and Treasurer in the early 1980s.

<sup>70</sup> See: <http://profiles.arts.monash.edu.au/alistair-thomson/biography/>; <http://hsc-people.open.ac.uk/j.bornat>; <http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/faculties/faculty-of-social-sciences-and-humanities/people/surnames-d-to-j/jenny-harding/>; [http://www.open.ac.uk/hsc/ldsite/biogs/walmsley\\_biog.html](http://www.open.ac.uk/hsc/ldsite/biogs/walmsley_biog.html); <http://personal.rhul.ac.uk/usjd/135/> (accessed: 17 V 2013).



those teaching and researching in the sector especially through seminars and an annual advanced school. In addition, the Higher Education Academy commissioned a booklet on learning and teaching oral history.<sup>71</sup> In part, the demand from students who now expect oral history as part of university courses is an important driving factor. However, changes in funding of universities in Britain are also reinforcing oral history's position. The state now expects academics to produce peer-reviewed outputs and demonstrate the impact of their research beyond the university sector and the popularisation of community oral history offers academics ways of engaging with new audiences and making that impact.

Critics of the Society have consistently argued that seeking to represent both academic and community oral history would inevitably encourage recurring tensions. There is some evidence for this. As early as the 1970s George Ewart Evans expressed concerns that the academics on the Society's Committee were seeking to oust him.<sup>72</sup> More recently, there has been some resistance within the Trustees to the development of Higher Education initiatives.

The connections of the Society to Higher Education bodies and to national organisations have resulted in claims that there has been an 'institutionalisation' of oral history.<sup>73</sup> However, an historical analysis of the Society's Committee membership demonstrates that while academics were in the majority in the early years, this has not been the case for most part. More typically, in 2012–2013 out of twenty-three Trustees only nine were university academics. If observers can claim institutionalisation then it is perhaps in the way that so much oral history since the 1990s has been state funded. In addition, the long-term influence of archivists, museum professionals and librarians within the Society might reinforce the institutionalisation argument. Even then, this is to ignore other factors. There is a wide range of participants who undertake oral history: from retired police officers in Northern Ireland writing their history of the Troubles to South Asian elders investigating the impact of Bollywood on memory. This not only undermines the charge, but it also addresses some of the concern of divisions

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<sup>71</sup> See: [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/heahistory/elibrary/internal/rg\\_smith\\_oralhistory\\_20111015/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/heahistory/elibrary/internal/rg_smith_oralhistory_20111015/) (accessed: 17 V 2013).

<sup>72</sup> Oral history interview with Bill Williams (recorded by R. Wilkinson).

<sup>73</sup> See: O.R. Collins, *Oral history's institutionalisation in British historiography: rise and crisis of a sub-discipline* (PhD), Aberystwyth 2010.

opening between an inner circle of experts and a wider periphery. Not only are there differences within the inner circle, but those who join the Society on a temporary basis do so because they are active in oral history; they are not passive recipients of knowledge.

In recognition of the active membership back issues of *Oral History* have since 2010 been made available on-line and free to members through JSTOR, the scholarly journal archive. This is regardless of whether or not they have an institutional base with a subscription to JSTOR.<sup>74</sup> At the same time, institutional access has grown in significance. In 2011, 1,042 universities around the world paid a subscription for back issues of *Oral History* through JSTOR, with 52,794 journal articles downloaded or viewed in that year alone. The on-line availability of back copies is breathing new life into older debates amongst and beyond the membership and the use of archived articles, especially by students, means that *Oral History* is becoming increasingly cited in the bibliographies of academic courses.

Reaching beyond Higher Education, Sallie Purkis was producing a regular column in *Oral History* from the early 1980s on the use of oral history in schools. In addition, Purkis authored the Society's first published booklet: *Oral History in Schools*.<sup>75</sup> There was a break around the late 1980s in the Society's commitment to school's oral history. However, with the educationalist Alan Redfern joining the Committee in the 1990s there followed a reengagement in this area reflected in journal articles.<sup>76</sup> There then was a second hiatus after 2000, and it is only in the last few years that primary and secondary education has reappeared on the Trustees' agenda. It is an interesting, and unanswered question, whether these alternating periods of activity and inactivity reflect changes within schools' oral history or simply arose because of changing levels of interest within the Society. However, it does also underline the ebb and flow of oral history in specific areas, dependent on who joins and leaves the esoteric (inner) circle as well as wider historical contexts, rather than a trajectory marked by ground making moments.

Throughout, oral history in Britain did not develop in isolation and it is the exchange of ideas internationally that offers one way of thinking about

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<sup>74</sup> <http://www.ohs.org.uk/journals/online.php> (accessed: 17 V 2013).

<sup>75</sup> See: S. Purkis, *Oral History in Schools*. Colchester 1980. See also: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2007/sep/29/obituaries.guardianobituaries> (accessed: 17 V 2013).

<sup>76</sup> See for example: A. Redfern, *Both Understanding and Knowledge: The Value of Oral Evidence in the Classroom*, „Oral History”, Vol. 20 (1992), No. 1, p. 29–33.

the 'turn to memory' – the final so-call paradigm shift to be considered here. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, oral historians in Britain were already aware of work that was going on in the rest of the world. *Oral History* from the beginning published articles from around the world and early issues featured papers from or about Eire, Sweden, Canada and parts of Africa. The Society's Committee sought out international links. In 1972 Thea (Vigne) Thompson and Paul Thompson, for example, visited the United States meeting with other oral historians.<sup>77</sup> Six years later the excitement is tangible even in what is a formal announcement of the Society's forthcoming 1979 annual conference:

„We have been fortunate in securing a grant from the Social Science Research Council, which will enable us to assist some of the leading European pioneers in the oral history method with their expenses in travelling to Britain. There will be participants from Italy, France, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Spain, Hungary and we hope also from Poland”.<sup>78</sup>

International collaborations and disagreements of the 1980s were a source of inspiration for researchers working in narrative, including trajectory and genre, and this resulted in a number of edited collections of essays bringing the work of practitioners from around the world together.<sup>79</sup> In addition, there were was the short-lived journal *Life Histories/Récits de Vie*, an international partner journal to *Oral History*. *Life Histories/Récits de Vie* was subsequently to join with the North American *International Journal of Oral History* to form the *International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories* – a book series of collected articles that ran from 1993 and 1996. At the end of that run, the International Oral History Association (IOHA) was established.

As well as developing their understanding of narrative in oral histories, oral historians were responding directly to criticisms regarding the status of oral histories as 'historical evidence'. However, there was no single response as the paradigm shift model might suggest. One rejoinder was to argue that researchers should routinely combine oral histories with other historical sources. This often meant testing memories for reliability and validity against

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<sup>77</sup> British Library Sound Archive, C1149/05, Oral history interview with Thea Thompson, 5 I 2008, 14 II 2008, 23 IV 2008, 3 VI 2008, 7 VI 2008, 28 VII 2008 (recorded by R. Wilkinson).

<sup>78</sup> J. Teasdale, G. Harkell, E. Cregeen, J. Bornat, S. Purkis, B. Williams, *News*, „Oral History”, Vol. 6 (1978), No. 2, p. 4–34.

<sup>79</sup> Including P. Thompson, N. Burchardt, *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe*, London 1982.

other sources, and 'triangulating' evidence. Indeed many would still agree with the French sociologist Daniel Bertaux, who was once a collaborator of Paul Thompson's and later a founder and President of the French Sociological Association, that life stories, including oral histories, contain 'a large proportion of factual data that can be verified'.<sup>80</sup> Others however argued for greater consideration of the subjectivity of memory and in doing so would prefigure later developments. Most of those engaged in oral history in the mid-1980s, especially community based oral historians, continued to point out that regardless of the reliability or otherwise of memory, oral history was often the only means of investigating particular aspects of the majority of lives.

It may seem somewhat counterintuitive, but at the time there were those who rightly thought that historians would entirely discount the status of the interviewee as historical agent if oral historians were to accept that memory was wholly subjective, partial and selective. The lack of an academic base in Britain at the time made most oral historians even more cautious of abandoning claims that oral history could provide direct historical evidence. Nevertheless, the debates that would emerge in the early 1990s were important in their timing as they resonated with younger academics, including human geographers, who were pursuing a postmodern turn that included a greater appreciation of both subjectivities and memory. However, to conclude that oral historians were not interested in memory before the debate in the 1990s would be erroneous. It is also to do the reminiscence movement a disservice and to ignore its influence on oral history in Britain.

Oral histories were often the source of inspiration for reminiscence workers, as well community publishing and developments in the psychology of old age. Joanna Bornat, currently the longest serving Committee member and journal editor, has been particularly influential in maintaining the place of reminiscence, and the processes of memory, in the consciousness of oral historians.<sup>81</sup> By the mid-1980s, reminiscence materials, emerging from both national charities and local groups, were engaging the imagination of a wide spectrum of people who were working with older people. Insights

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<sup>80</sup> D. Bertaux, *A response to Thierry Kochuyt's 'Biographic and Empiricist Illusions: A Reply to Recent Criticism'*. „Biography and Society Newsletter” (1995), p. 2–6.

<sup>81</sup> See for example: J. Bornat, *Exploring living memory – the uses of reminiscence*, „Ageing and Society”, Vol. 5 (1985), No. 3, p. 333; P. Schweitzer, J. Bornat, *Age Exchange: A Retrospective*, „Oral History”, Vol. 20 (1992), No. 2, p. 32–39; *Reminiscence Reviewed: Evaluations, Achievements, Perspectives*, ed. J. Bornat, Buckingham 1994.

from gerontological work on memory and reminiscence studies therefore not only proved influential in helping to recast popular beliefs of ageing, but reinforced an existing belief amongst pioneering oral historians that they should prioritise the collection of older people's memories.

Placing greater value on the lives and experiences of older people promoted the belief amongst reminiscence workers that they were engaged in a movement. If there has been a paradigm shift involving oral history it is within wider societal changes in the treatment of older people and their memories. Even as late as the 1970s, remembering the past was widely seen as pathological and symptomatic of ageing and psychological decline. Health and social care professionals routinely discouraged and labelled remembering as unhealthy amongst older people (who (commonly labelled 'the aged'). That older relatives might, as a result of reminiscing, begin 'living in the past' was a common and popular fear amongst families. Forty years on such attitudes seem unimaginable. Moreover, that very inconceivability provides the evidence of the scale of change in professional and public consciousness. Indeed, by the 1990s the public had begun to value the memories of elders as precious social resources. Such a change goes almost unnoticed in surveys of oral history, although most recently Pam Schweitzer, another champion of reminiscence in Britain and one-time Society Trustee, has reflected on how older people's narrated life experience were placed at the heart of a range of public history projects. This included verbatim theatre by professional companies, older people's participation schemes, inter-generational schools projects, inter-cultural meetings and therapeutic uses of reminiscence.<sup>82</sup>

Contrary to later claims, there was also a great deal of discussion about the challenges of using memory as an historical source even in the early years. For example, reflecting on the 1972 conference, Tony Green, the folklorist, argued for a greater understanding of the subjectivity of memory. And for oral historians „to concentrate much more on history as what people think happened, including the presentation of radically different accounts,

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<sup>82</sup> P. Schweitzer, *Making memories matter: reminiscence and creativity, A thirty-year retrospective*, „Oral History”, Vol. 41(2013), No. 1. Other members of the Society's Trainers' Group and Network, including Rib Davies and Roger Kitchen are also involved in oral history in theatre productions.

in order to demonstrate ... that different individuals and groups experience the same event in totally different ways, and to analyse why this is so".<sup>83</sup>

In the same year Michael Frisch in the United States argued that memory should become the object of study for oral historians and not simply a methodological concern. This marked the beginning of a radical departure from debates about the historical truthfulness of recall and a turn towards addressing subjectivities. In doing so, oral historians would point out that the very 'unreliability' of memory was the strength of oral history. Alessandro Portelli's work proved particularly influential, especially his argument that oral histories could provide new ways of understanding the past, not just in what interviewees recall, but also with regard to continuity and change in the *meaning* given to events.<sup>84</sup>

Others, including groups unconnected to the Society, gradually took up Portelli's position that he had first articulated in Italy in 1979. For example, three years later, members of the Popular Memory Group at the Centre for Contemporary Studies in Birmingham raised key questions about the relationship between individual and social remembering.<sup>85</sup> Eight years after that, these influences became evident in two publications by Society activists. While Al Thompson highlighted how ideologies, social relations and culture shape memories over time.<sup>86</sup> Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson focused on the 'myths we live by'.<sup>87</sup> Increasingly oral historians, and others, in Britain began to pay greater attention to the subjective processes of remembering.

Much has been made of the turn-to-memory as defining moment in the recent history of oral history – the paradigm shift in the Perks and Thomson schematic. There were certainly internal arguments, especially emerging from the 1987 Sixth International Oral History meeting at Oxford. That the debate had polarised members of the Society, and shaken the thought collectives esoteric circle is evident in Paul Thompson's

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<sup>83</sup> T. Green, *The Leicester Conference on Oral History: Four impressions*, „Oral History“, Vol. 1 (1971), No. 3, p. 10.

<sup>84</sup> A. Portelli, *What makes oral history different*, [in:] *The Oral History Reader*, eds R. Perks, A. Thomson, London–New York 1998, p. 63–75.

<sup>85</sup> Popular Memory Group, *Popular memory: theory, politics, method* [in:] R. Johnson [et al.], *Making Histories: studies in history-writing and politics*, London 1982.

<sup>86</sup> A. Thomson, *Anzac memories: Putting popular memory theory into practice in Australia*, „Oral History“, Vol. 18 (1990), No. 1, p. 25–31.

<sup>87</sup> R. Samuel and P. Thompson, *The Myths We Live By*, London 1990.

letter to *Oral History* published in late 1995. Thompson was responding to an article by Al Thomson, Michael Frisch, and Paula Hamilton a year earlier. Thompson felt that this was a rewriting or at least a simplification of the history of oral history in Britain.<sup>88</sup> In doing so, he would claim that change was a result of generational differences.

„... each generation of scholars has, as part of its coming of age, to pass through the oedipal phase of attacking and pushing aside the previous generation. This has not been so easy for oral historians, since the present movement is still too young to have truly ancient authority figures for attack. Hence there has been a tendency, from surprisingly early on, to create ancestor figures. Indeed, I myself felt I was being helplessly pushed into the role of a mythical ‘ancestor’ even as early as the second international conference, at Amsterdam in 1982”.<sup>89</sup>

Both Al Thomson and Graham Dawson responded to Paul Thompson’s comments, with Dawson offering a particularly robust counterblast aimed at both Thompson and early oral history more generally. Dawson also pointed out that the Popular Memory Group’s critique that past-present hegemonic or dominant discourses framed memory. Just how much this was the case would become a matter of debate in the next period. Most tellingly, Dawson’s characterisation of Thompson’s recollection of international relationships in the 1970s and 1980s, as a ‘coterie of pals’, was not only a corrective, but an unsuspecting marker of the moment in – 1990s when the Society’s own thought collective (and coterie of pals) had started to change and expand.<sup>90</sup>

Editorial control of *Oral History* had begun to shift some five years before with Paul Thompson listed as the Founder Editor for the first time in the spring 1991 issue. The previous issue had included Al Thomson and Paul Thompson, as well as Rob Perks and Joanna Bornat as full editors. After 1991 and for more than fifteen years the core editorial team would be Perks, Thomson and Bornat, a relationship that only ended with Al Thomson’s return to Australia in 2007. During this period, the editors firmly and creatively established the centrality of memory in the pages of *Oral History*.

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<sup>88</sup> A. Thomson, M. Frisch, P. Hamilton, *The memory and history debates: Some international perspectives*, „Oral History”, Vol. 22 (1994), No. 2, p. 33–43.

<sup>89</sup> P. Thompson, *Letter*, „Oral History”, Vol. 23 (1995), No. 2, p. 27–29.

<sup>90</sup> For the letters see: G. Dawson, *Letter*; also: A. Thomson, *Letter*, „Oral History”, Vol. 24 (1996), No. 1, p. 26–28.

The debates and personal changes were happening after large scale funding for community oral history had ended. The later support of HLF was yet to occur and was unforeseen. This hiatus in activity not only allowed for debate, but also meant that oral historians were seeking new funding sources. This included funding by local town, district or regional Councils in adult education and continuing education within universities and colleges. The increasing emphasis on memory also began to place oral history in increasingly significant and interdisciplinary streams of academic research funding as well as providing an important focus for future oral history research.

How far the 'turn-to-memory' penetrated into the majority of oral history activity is, however, debateable. Amongst researchers and community groups using oral historians as a simple method of collecting data or stories there might be little deliberation about memory. For others, there continues to be an emphasis on the processes of oral history that are wider than considerations of memory. Paul Thompson argued that, taken together, memory and narrative, as well as engagement, issues of identity and (inter) subjectivity, '...opened up much richer interpretative possibilities from the interviews collected and at the same time fostered a subtler reflection on the nature of oral history practice.'<sup>91</sup>

This statement by Thompson rather underlines a prevailing mood within the Society of trying to maintain unity while encouraging disparate activities and theories. If a paradigm shift had occurred over the 'turn to memory', it is likely that the Society would have split. However, in maintaining that unity members of the Society, especially amongst the esoteric, would have to find other points of agreement. The making of practice guidelines from the mid-1990s onwards would provide one way of doing this. Another way was to continue the debates that the 'turn to memory' had started. A third was that the enrichment, that Thompson had identified, would continue to assist the subsequent growth of oral history that would in turn keep the esoteric circle engaged to a point that activists perceived (again) that disagreements were counterproductive.

The Society increased the provision of advice on doing oral history, with members at the British Library's Sound Archive playing a key role in establishing procedures and standards in oral history collection and archiving.

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<sup>91</sup> P. Thompson, *Editorial*, „Oral History”, Vol. 22 (1994), No. 2, p. 2.



There was in this a tacit recognition of the esoteric/exoteric development, especially with the publication of ethical and legal principles. *Oral History* had first carried an article discussing 'legal considerations' as early as 1976,<sup>92</sup> and the ethics of undertaking oral history had become a common feature for reflection in the journal and the Society's activities as a whole. However, it was Alan Ward, an employee of the British Library and Society Chair, who in 1995 brought this material together to produce a definitive text and the first systematic set of legal and ethical guidelines in Britain.<sup>93</sup> More recently Perks and Bornat have coordinated a major rewrite of the guidelines and the Society has published these as an on-line, hypertext resource.<sup>94</sup>

In addition to creating guidelines, training provision has become another priority area. The Society's Training Group, first established at the end of the 1990s, has developed into a team of fifteen experienced oral historians as Society accredited as trainers. The group meets annually to review course quality (from participant feedback), content, development and provision. Between 2008 and 2012, around 2,500 participants have attended around 300 courses run by the Society with attendees drawn from local authorities, major charities, community groups, and higher education.<sup>95</sup>

The spread and popularisation of oral history from the 1990s onwards has been extraordinary both nationally and internationally. However, the 'paradigm shift' model might lead to the conclusion that oral history's achievements are in the past and that the future looks a great deal duller and less radical. Such thoughts were explicitly raised by the South African oral historian Sean Field and have been subsequently expressed by others including Sherna Gluck.<sup>96</sup> This perceived lack of radicalism may be a result of the presence of an older elite group within the thought collective recalling a mythical golden age of oral history discoveries. However, it may also be a failure to recognise that the historical contexts in which oral history

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<sup>92</sup> D. Lance, *Oral history recording: a note on legal considerations*, „Oral History”, Vol. 4 (1976), No. 1.

<sup>93</sup> A. Ward, *Copyright, ethics and oral history*, Colchester 1995.

<sup>94</sup> The new ethical guidelines are at <http://www.ohs.org.uk/ethics.php> (accessed: 17 V 2013).

<sup>95</sup> See: <http://www.ohs.org.uk/courses.php> for current training offerings (last accessed: 17 V 2013).

<sup>96</sup> S. Field, *From stepchild to elder: Has oral history become 'respectable'?*, IOHA 2009 (<http://www.iohanet.org/debate/>); also: S. Gluck, *Has Feminist Oral History Lost Its Radical/subversive Edge?*, „Oral History”, Vol. 39 (2011), No. 2, p. 63–72.

have operated have dramatically changed. In Britain and elsewhere, organisational defeats suffered by the labour movement have led to the decline of the radical left.<sup>97</sup> The failure to appreciate the significance of changing historical circumstances is, amongst some, compounded by an inability to recognise new radical ideas and emerging youth movements.<sup>98</sup>

In four decades, the Society has grown from less than fifty members to just over a thousand and from the mid-2000s onwards. The Society's organisational structures have not only reflected this membership growth, but wider societal changes have also shaped the level and types of oral history activity undertaken. The radical thinking and a culture of a vibrant political left shaped the early years of the Society, with a common thought-mood ensuring that nascent oral historians largely suspended the sectarianism that was so evident within the political left at the time. That mood, later derided as naive in terms of understandings of memory, provided the means for building an important organisational base for oral history in Britain. Funding sources for oral history also contributed to the making of both collective and mood. Thus, from small beginnings mainly amongst a small network of friends working in universities, oral history would rapidly grow through community initiatives, including reminiscence and community publishing, in the mid-1980s and then in a second wave of mass funded activity from the mid-1990s onwards. Not only did oral history thrive beyond academia, but it also provided a training base and a continuing source of inspiration for the small minority who had found work in Higher Education.

Ideas are important, but they arise from discussions, and occasionally sharp debate, by people within historical contexts. Both oral history itself and the recognition of the significance of intersubjectivity emerged slowly and were not 'paradigm shifts' in any sense. In contrast, the 'turn to memory' occurred at a point in time when a number of factors were coming together, although in Kuhn's terms this still does not constitute a 'paradigm shift'. The ideas behind the turn had been around for more than a decade, but what made them important in the early 1990s were changes in the

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<sup>97</sup> For a parallel critique about the relation between theory and practice, Marxism and struggle in this example critique, see: C. Bundy, *Marxism in South Africa: Context, themes and challenges*, „Transformation“ (1991), No. 16, p. 56–66.

<sup>98</sup> For example, some in the Occupy movement have explicitly challenged the usefulness of 'shared authority'. See: <http://occupyoralthistory.wordpress.com/> (accessed: 17 V 2013).

resourcing of oral history and the impact of the reminiscence movement on perceptions of remembering more generally. What turned ideas into practice was not only their sustained application and demonstration within the *Oral History* journal, but the wider acceptance of the importance of subjectivities in a range of academic disciplines.

In the last decade, the Society has also further matured as a thought-collective and become a representative aggregation of increasingly specialised oral history activities within a range of different settings, including community, museum, media, archive and academy. As already noted, the study of memory provides oral historians with the opportunity of alliances with the members of an assortment of disciplines as well as people with differing interests outside Higher Education. In addition, fresh areas of enquiry are developing, including in public history, and as a result, new spaces are opening up in the representation and reception of oral history. Arguably, however, oral history has also lost some of its breadth as the focus on individual memory has tightened, for example, both reminiscence and oral tradition (including an interest in dialect) are less influential than they once were.

If subjectivities have become increasingly important in arts, humanities and social science, amongst the public there was an increasing sense of identity and selfhood. Little wonder that oral history has found receptive audiences and new practitioners. Community oral history, especially in its second post-1994 phase, along with oral history in the mass media and the emergent heritage industry, have all popularised the consumption and doing of oral history. In turn, all this has helped to raise demand for oral history teachers and researchers in Higher Education. As oral history has moved beyond the immediate control of a tiny group of interested individuals and into the mainstream, this popularity has been particularly inspiring for some oral historians. However, applying Fleck's approach also suggests that the Society has regularly faced difficulties that have arisen from both growing activity and changes in the constituencies of practitioners. Particularly notable from the late-1990s has been a large periphery (or exoteric circle), including non-members, that looks toward the Society for support and often advise. This exoteric circle is not a single unity, but consists of diverse interest groups with divergent material conditions and needs. This is generating multiple and at times contradictory demands on the Society, further compounded by a rapidly changing economic environment. This has also resulted in some unease amongst a Society that has traditionally tried to lead by example rather by diktat or regulation.

In his writings, Fleck raises a key problem concerning thought collectives. Fleck argues that healthy thought collectives are democratic at least to the extent that their ideas are agreed by wide consensus (that is, wider than an inner circle of experts) as well as being open to new members and new ideas. The question he raises is how can a member of the public if uneducated become a member of a specialised group of experts? For Fleck, this imperfection can result in expert elites turning collectively created theories and practices into self-evident, unquestioned, truths. Members of esoteric circles not only become the gatekeepers of good practice and the 'right' theories, but also claim what they do and say are objective facts. This in turn produces a cult of expert heroes or self-declared geniuses. Over its lifetime, and as detailed above, the Oral History Society has met this challenge in a number of ways. The first arises from how oral historians in Britain work, especially in explicitly addressing the research relationship as a process of sharing authority between researcher and researched. At heart is the belief that the interviewee is an expert (of her or his own life) and more broadly, that oral historians should challenge the hierarchies of research relationships by working *with* those whose narratives and memories they research. It is important to note that the limits and problems of 'shared authority', especially post-interview, have been the focus of a number of studies,<sup>99</sup> and there are indications that it might be timely to revisit the concept.

The second way that the Oral History Society has remained open is in the approaches taken in promoting oral history. The long-term claim, passed from generation to generation in the Society, is that oral history is so simple that anyone can do it and that 'anybody' can become an oral historian.<sup>100</sup> However, in doing so, oral historians have often been overly modest about the skills, attributes and knowledge required in undertaking oral history. As more people engage with oral history, the communication and social skills and most importantly generosity in research, including a commitment to archiving, is not always evident amongst those newly adopting oral history as a method. This is especially notable amongst academic colleagues. Similarly, insights about memory, narrative and intersubjectivity are often

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<sup>99</sup> See for example: „Oral History Review”, Vol. 30 (2003), No. 1.

<sup>100</sup> In Fleck's analysis, the status of the 'anybody' is fictive or ideal thus aiding the process of objectification of the thought collectives agreed knowledge.

missing from some of those turning to oral history including community oral historians. Then there are further difficulties in encouraging not just the collection of oral history interviews, but in the mass reuse, analysis and (re)presentation of oral histories for different audiences in an array of outputs and media.

The response thus far is for the Society to highlight casework examples of good practice and the appropriate application of theory, mainly through journal articles, additional advice, support, guidelines and training. As well as the journal, the annual conference has been an opportunity for dialogue between oral historians, including a way for the esoteric to learn from the exoteric. Missing from this, however, has been the teaching of oral history in Higher Education. In Britain, this is an obvious omission, because of the numbers now taught to degree level. In 1950's Britain, just 3.4 per cent of young people went to university. According to the latest data, participation rates among people aged 17 to 30 has risen 49 per cent (and this does not include private institutions).<sup>101</sup> This dramatic rise in the democratic intellect, within such a relatively short space of time, mirrors the rise of oral history. Arguably, these two factors, the opening up of higher education and the rise of a democratic approach to doing history, are connected. However, while more members of the public are educated to a higher standard today than yesterday, oral history has been far too long absent from that education. In addition, oral history has not benefitted from the rich input that undergraduates and postgraduates deliver nor the time and energy brought by academics who are dedicated to research and teaching. This provides opportunities, but also brings challenges to a Society benefitting from an openness that contrasts with the way Higher Education is currently organised.

The need to develop oral history and the Oral History Society both in ideas and in organisation has not ended with a last, great, imagined paradigm shift. Instead, in meeting changing demand in shifting circumstances, a new generation of oral historians will need to restate in new ways the peculiarities of oral history.

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<sup>101</sup> Statistics for 2011–12. See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-business-innovation-skills/series/statistics-on-higher-education-initial-participation-rates> (accessed: 17 V 2013).

W 2013 r. Stowarzyszenie Historii Mówionej obchodziło swoją czterdziestą rocznicę istnienia. Odegrało ono bardzo znaczącą rolę w rozwoju dziedziny historii mówionej (*oral history*), szczególnie w Wielkiej Brytanii. Artykuł przedstawia ten rozwój i rozpatruje go w szerszym kontekście, jednocześnie poddając analizie zmieniający się skład osobowy Stowarzyszenia, który uczestniczył w tym procesie. W analizie historii dziedziny badawczej historii mówionej autor stosuje raczej koncepcje kolektywnego myślenia Ludwika Flecka niż model zmiany paradygmatu przyjmowany we wcześniejszych interpretacjach tej historii. To umożliwia zrozumienie historii samego Stowarzyszenia, jak również rozwoju historii mówionej w szerszym kontekście zmian społecznych wraz ze źródłami i całą gamą wpływów intelektualnych. Można również stwierdzić, że podczas gdy samo Stowarzyszenie na pewno będzie wciąż odgrywało dużą rolę w przyszłości, to jednak rola ta będzie prawdopodobnie ulegała zmianom, a do tego będą w niej pojawiać się istotne napięcia wynikające ze ścierania się różnych koncepcji kolektywnego myślenia.

**Graham  
Smith**

*Krótką historią  
Stowarzyszenia Historii  
Mówionej (Oral History  
Society), 1973–2013*

